

**DRAFT**

**THE URBAN DESIGN PROCESS**

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## THE URBAN DESIGN PROCESS

### URBAN DESIGN TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

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Urban design concerns itself with the relationships among the various parts of the city that together make up the physical pattern and character of our settlements. A city's quality is a function of how land uses, buildings, public places, landscaping, landmarks, and streets interact. The following is an explanation of how graphic analysis tools, public input and implementation guidelines combine to achieve the ultimate goal of urban design: namely, improving the quality of life of our communities.

A thorough understanding of the existing city fabric and economic vitality is the starting point for any analysis of urban form. The components or elements that make up a city's structure have a big impact on the appearance and experience of a city, the functioning of its infrastructure and the quality of life it provides for its citizens. The research process of urban design maps these elements, graphically revealing the character of the settlement's form so that it can be easily perceived, analyzed, and ultimately manipulated (if desired by the community). The tools result from this process- master plans, specific plans, and streetscape concepts- typically combine policy change, design intervention and incentive programs to achieve a desirable community objective. Some of these graphics include:



#### *Streets and Blocks*

The Streets and Blocks diagram illustrates the density and hierarchy of existing streets in the city. It highlights the variety of development patterns present, and quickly identifies areas of the city that are poorly integrated into the greater city fabric.



#### *Figure Ground*

The Figure Ground diagram illustrates the scale and pattern of the built environment. It highlights the various grains of development and shows the relationship between buildings and the spaces that surround them.



#### *Auto Serving Surfaces*

The Auto Serving Surfaces diagram illustrates the paved surfaces in the city or study area that are dedicated to vehicular use. It also demonstrates how large expanses of parking areas can isolate buildings and break down their relationship to the street.



## Street Sections

The Street Section diagram illustrates the fundamental organization of the primary elements of the street design composition. The cross-section is most often used to analyze the relative proportions of open space allotted to moving vehicles, on-street parking, dedicated transit areas, pedestrian spaces and amenities. Urban designers are careful to construct street sections from building to building in order to study the qualities of the "volume" of space defined by these elements.

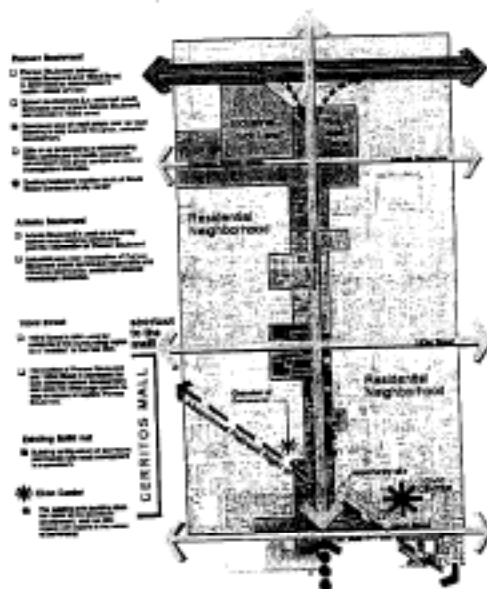


## Vulnerability to Change

The Vulnerability to Change diagram identifies likely opportunity sites available for investment in new real estate development. It maps parcels that appear to be underutilized economically.

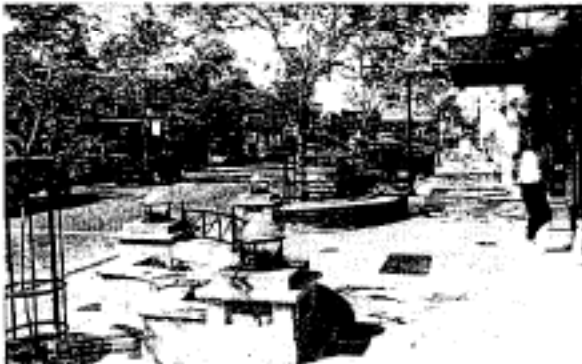
## Existing Development Diagram

The Existing Development Diagram goes beyond typical land use maps to combine existing use with built form to illustrate the existing pattern of investment on the land.



## Urban Design Context Plan

By identifying the forces of development and change that have manifested current conditions, urban design can choose which forces to support and where to focus interventions to achieve community objectives.



Other important physical components of urban design, that when pulled together can have a strong impact on the character and qualities of a place, include:

**Street Type:** The street type must serve the development type. A street that fronts an auto-oriented shopping center is different from one that fronts historic shopfronts. To be successful and dynamic, the street design must support the activity and economics of the area, both in terms of what exists and what is envisioned for the future.

**Gateways:** Identifying elements or structures can serve to announce entry points, define neighborhood identity, and heighten the experience of public space.

**Flexibility:** As a public space, the street supports various activities. One of the challenges in urban design is to make spaces and elements that can serve double and triple duty, such as a transit node that also serves as a local gathering space. Successful spaces maintain a cycle of uses throughout the day.

**Lighting:** Street lighting is a special concern. Correct scale, intensity, color, and distribution of light are essential in enhancing safety and ambience

**Landscape:** Street trees and other plantings can have a strong impact on the quality and “feel” of a street. They affect perception of street width, provide needed shade, and can be utilized to create a consistent pattern of design.

**Furnishings:** Street furnishings are an opportunity to strengthen and unify the public realm. Bus shelters, fountains, seating and trash receptacles are all opportunities to create a “family of objects” – each one unique, but related in character.



## PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL SUPPORT



In a democratic society, it is an absolute requirement to organize urban design and district revitalization projects around a series of community meetings open to the public. The workshop process should be designed so that the community comes away with a real sense of ownership for the final recommendations that are brought forward to the City. This is achieved by "leading through listening," rather than using the workshop to "sell" consultant ideas to participants. Successful community workshop techniques are designed to illicit responses from all participants, including the most reluctant. As participants move through the workshop process, they experience the satisfaction of contributing elements of the solutions, of learning what their options are, and develop an understanding of how various features can contribute to or damage a downtown's prospective success. When local residents, study area stakeholders, city officials and the consultant can engage in the design process together, the final product succeeds in achieving its objectives because it is a direct expression of a rich base of knowledge and experience, and because it enjoys a broad base of political support.

In most instances, revitalization projects require strong action to dramatically turn things around. Moving around entitlements by revising land use regulations to reorganize the pattern of retail into a more compact cluster, or focusing capital improvement funds entirely on a singular streetscape or other special public place (rather than equally distributing such funding to be near every business) are two examples of such "strong measures." Unexpected and dramatic changes such as these are always difficult. Therefore, *taking effective action in any civic revitalization process typically means embracing controversial measures.* To enable City Councils to proceed with such measures, it is absolutely crucial that strategic action plan items are developed in a public workshop setting capable of generating substantial public support for these actions.

## IMPLEMENTATION

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Quality urban design recommendations are the result of thorough study of existing conditions and careful collection of public input. Together these two elements determine the approach necessary to achieve the goals identified in the public outreach process. The implementation of urban design recommendations falls into the three major categories of *Policy Tools*, *Assistance Programs* and *Capital Improvements*. The prioritization and feasibility of each recommendation type depends on the unique financial and political resources of each city government.

### *Policy Tools*

Development Standards address those aspects that are essential to achieve the goals of the urban design recommendations. They are specifications for building design and site development that govern height, setbacks, floor area ratio, allowable lot coverage, and permitted uses.

Design Guidelines, on the other hand, are discretionary. They provide guidance for new development in terms of more subjective considerations, such as district character or design details. They also serve as criteria for design review by City staff. While design guidelines may not specify a particular architectural style, they can be a guide for creating building massing and articulation that will contribute to the overall goals of the community.

### *Capital Improvements*

Capital improvements are used as tools to attract the interest of private development activity and build public support for civic improvements. Improvements such as transportation extensions, infrastructure enhancement, and new utilities can serve as incentives for new development. The creation of civic amenities like public spaces or recreational facilities can inspire civic pride and public enthusiasm. In both of these ways, capital improvements can act as a starting point to generate the momentum needed to implement the balance of the urban design recommendations.

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## *Assistance Programs*

Assistance programs provide financial or informational support to the organizations tasked with the implementation of urban design recommendations. Financial assistance can take on many forms, including grants, revolving loan funds and tax increment financing, and come from many sources, ranging from federal to local government. Other sources that should not be overlooked include special interest programs invested in a particular subject area. Regardless of the character of the financial assistance program, its purpose is to provide the incentive often needed to attract private investors in the specific recommendations that are generated by the established goals of the community. Similarly, assistance programs that provide practical knowledge for the implementation of urban design recommendations serve to educate both the public community and the private investor about special conditions of the recommendations. One example of these kinds of conditions, particularly relevant in industrial areas, is the growing number of sites identified as urban brownfields. The uncertainty and added risk of development on these sites makes it important to establish ways of educating private investment about the financial and technical assistance available for brownfield remediation.

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## **Prioritization**

Regardless of which kind of recommendations are pursued, it is important to structure an implementation strategy that can provide the momentum of public support and private investment interest to reach the long-term goals of the project. In most cases, this means achieving measurable success through short-term successes, within a two to five year time window. If measurable improvements take longer than this, it is likely that the momentum of the process will falter and the overall project goals may never be achieved. With this in mind, it is critical to use the resources of *Policy Tools*, *Capital Improvements*, and *Assistance Programs* in the manner that best suits the unique condition of the city.